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World War I: The Soldiers of Kearney State Normal School

Parker Witthuhn

Just over 100 years ago on 6 April 1917, the United States of America's entrance into World War I made tremendous impacts on communities across the nation. Although it is not remembered with as much significance today, WWI played a major role in the lives of both students and staff at the Kearney State Normal School. The school, commonly abbreviated as KSNS or KSN, was western Nebraska's first state teaching college and was the predecessor of the current University of Nebraska at Kearney. The Normal School was founded in 1905 and was only in its eleventh year of operation when Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany on 6 April 1917.¹ According to enrollment numbers from documents within the university's archives, the enrollment of the 1916-17 school year was 585 students with a total of 45 faculty members.² With such a small hub of scholars and educators, the Great War's impact would become extremely significant to the members of the school and the surrounding communities in Nebraska. The purpose of this article is to help modern scholars and members of the UNK community understand the significance the Great War at KSNS by discussing the specific experiences of students and staff that served during the conflict. The goal is that by sharing these experiences, the UNK community might be better able to identify, understand, and overcome new challenges that will no doubt shape the future of the University and the country.

¹ "UNK History," The University of Nebraska at Kearney, accessed 4 December 2018, www.unk.edu/about/history.php.

² "Enrollment and Faculty" (ca. 1905-1972), Document, University of Nebraska Kearney Library, accessed 29 November 2018.

The Great War began in Europe in August 1914, almost three years prior to President Wilson's declaration of war on Germany. By the time April 1917 arrived, the United States was desperately short on men in their armed forces. Compared to the massive armies and navies of the already mobilized European countries, the U.S. was not prepared for war in any way. When Congress authorized the declaration of war on Germany on 6 April 1917, the US Army only had about 127,000 soldiers, and the various state National Guard units only had about 181,000 men.³ The US Army was dwarfed by the standing armies of the European Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary, which had held 11 million (for Germany) and 7.8 million (for Austria-Hungary) enlisted soldiers and reserves when they were mobilized in 1914.⁴ To raise a force that would be able to compete with the armies of Europe, the U.S. Congress authorized the expansion of the army through a dramatic increase in spending. The goal was to enlist and train about one million more men. However, the pace at which citizens were volunteering for service was extremely slow.⁵ Six weeks after declaring war on Germany, the U.S. Army had failed to enlist even 100,000 new soldiers.⁶ So, in an effort to speed up the process of raising the American Expeditionary Force, the American government turned to a method of conscription with the Selective Service Act of 1917. The bill was passed by Congress and signed into law on 18 May

³ Jim Garamone, *World War I: Building the American military*, Article. From the U.S. Army. 3 April 2017. https://www.army.mil/article/185229/world_war_i_building_the_american_military. (4 December 2018).

⁴ John Simkin, *Armies 1914*. Chart. Spartacus Educational Publishers Ltd, 1997-2016. From First World War Encyclopedia. <https://spartacus-educational.com/FWWarmies1914.htm>. (4 December 2018).

⁵ Mark Grotelueschen, *The AEF Way of War: The American Army and Combat in World War I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 11.

⁶ Grotelueschen, *The AEF*, p. 11-12.

1917. The law required all male U.S. citizens ages 21-30 years old, later expanded to ages 18-45 in August 1918, to register for a draft that could enlist them into military service.⁷ Around 2.8 million soldiers were drafted between May 1917 and the end of the Selective Service in 1919. There would also be about 2 million soldiers who volunteered for service into whichever branch of armed forces they chose during that same time period. For many this option was far more appealing than waiting to be selected by the draft and placed into a branch with little to no choice involved.⁸

The first national draft registration came on 5 June 1917.⁹ Many draft eligible Nebraskans tried to obtain an exemption from military service by doing war-related labor. Draft eligible men who worked in a certified agricultural or industrial job that would be contributing to the war effort, such as farming or manufacturing, would usually be allowed an exception from the draft and active military service.¹⁰ With the new Selective Service Act, each state was assigned a quota of men that had to be enlisted in the armed services with the draft. Nebraska was required to have 13,900 men enlisted for service under the stipulations of the new law. Of that total, 5,691 soldiers had already enlisted in the Nebraska National Guard. It is for this reason, combined with a last-minute adjustment to Nebraska's quota due to Hawaii's over-

⁷ "Background of Selective Service," Selective Service System, US Government, 4 December 2018, <https://www.sss.gov/About/History-And-Records/Background-Of-Selective-Service>.

⁸ Grotelueschen, *The AEF*, p. 11-12.

⁹ *The Antelope*, "K.S.N.S. Observes Registration Day." Kearney, Kearney State Normal School, 8 June 1917. From UNK Archives. (30 November 2018).

¹⁰ "Background of Selective Service," Selective Service System, US Government, 4 December 2018, <https://www.sss.gov/About/History-And-Records/Background-Of-Selective-Service>.

enlistment of troops, that on 18 July 1917 *The Kearney Daily Hub* reported the total of soldiers needed by the first draft was 8,185.¹¹ The state of Nebraska divided out the quota proportions of the draft to each county based on population of eligible draftees. Buffalo County was to draft 146 men into military service for the first round of conscripts into America's new National Army.¹² The draft in Buffalo County took place in Kearney on 20 July 1917 with the *Kearney Daily Hub* reporting the list of the 601 draft cards that were drawn and their corresponding draftees.¹³ These men were enlisted in military service based on the class system set up by the Selective Service Act and were enlisted in the numerical order they were drawn in.¹⁴ The drawing of 601 draft card numbers was to ensure that the full 146 slots for the county would be filled even if there were many exemptions from service granted by the draft boards. The first wave of these draftees began shipping out to training camps on 5 September 1917, and the last 23 of the first drafted men from Buffalo County shipped out for training on 4 March 1918.¹⁵

At Kearney State Normal School there was a huge shift in the demographic and the environment of the school that would also resonate throughout the community of Kearney as hundreds of their young men rushed to sign up and serve the country. Most of the men attending

¹¹ *Kearney Daily Hub*, "Hundred and Forty-Six Here"; "Nebraska Figures on Draft Changed," 18 July 1917, <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/APA/Kearney/#panel=document>. (accessed 4 December 2018).

¹² *Kearney Daily Hub*, "Hundred and Forty-Six Here," 18 July 1917.

¹³ *Kearney Daily Hub*, "Draft Numbers for Country Up to Three O'Clock," 20 July 1917.

¹⁴ "Background of Selective Service," Selective Service System, US Government, 4 December 2018, <https://www.sss.gov/About/History-And-Records/Background-Of-Selective-Service>.

¹⁵ *Kearney Daily Hub*. "Twenty-Three are to Leave for Fort Riley Next Monday". 28 February 1918.

school at KSNS were of prime age and class for the draft and military service. Because they were subject to the draft in their home counties from all around Nebraska, the call of the Great War pulled about 401 students and staff from the school between 1917 and 1918 and placed them into military service. This is according to the “Roll of Honor” section attributed to those men in the 1919 Blue and Gold Yearbook.¹⁶ However, due to the raised demand for agricultural goods, the many KSNS students who were from farming backgrounds were torn between serving in the military or serving on farms where their labor was needed to help bolster food production. Both tasks were essential for the war effort, but the thought of leaving school with nothing to show for it and entering war service was something many struggled with as well. This issue was addressed by the school’s faculty at a lengthy meeting on 30 April 1917. *The Antelope*, the school’s newspaper, reported the following Friday that students who wished to leave school and start on farm work, or are accepted into service by the Army or Navy, would be granted full class credit for the remainder of the term they were currently in.¹⁷ The ruling allowed students at any grade level to be granted the credits once proving that they were enlisting, had been drafted, or could certify their working position on a farm. *The Antelope’s* article would go on to point out that the ruling caused a rush of the school’s men to leave during that same week.¹⁸ In response to the growing number of men leaving the school, the president of KSNS George S. Dick, was quoted as saying, “Some things, tho, are more important than the individual student and his textbooks. A crisis is upon us, and if our country needs the boys and the boys want to go, we are willing for

¹⁶ Kearney State Normal School, *The Blue and Gold* (Kearney, Nebraska: 1919,) UNK Library Archives.

¹⁷ *The Antelope*, “Boys Answering Call of Nation,” 4 May 1917. (accessed 30 November 2018.) p. 1.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 1.

them to go, and they go with our blessing.”¹⁹ By the end of the first week in May 1917, about 30 men and one woman had left the school to enlist in military service or, in the case of Leila Gilleland, left for the farm to do war-related production work.²⁰

By the end of the year 1917, KSNS saw almost every single eligible man leave school to enroll in some form of military service.²¹ *The Antelope* ran a story on the front page of its 4 January 1918 issue of the paper detailing a list of the names and address for almost all soldiers that had come from the school since April 1917. The list contains the names of some 69 servicemen, and reported the diverse variety of positions that they were enlisted in, in the now vast US military. Soldiers like Lee Bragg, Roy Fredericks, Otto Jenson, Ben McCammon, Floyd Patterson, Foster Reynolds, and Ray Shue joined the Army in late 1917 and were stationed for training at Camp Cody, NM. All seven alumni were able to train and serve together in Company L of the 127th Heavy Field Artillery.²² It would turn out that these artillery units, and their canons, would be the most deadly weapons of the entire war. Over seventy percent of all fatalities on the Western Front are attributed to artillery shelling.²³ A former staff member of *The Antelope* and teacher at KSNS, 2nd Lieutenant Ferdinand A. Cedarburg, wrote about one of his own experiences with some enemy artillery fire in an interesting letter to *The Antelope*:

A little personal incident here — since you request — during our preparation I tired of staying at the echelon so one afternoon I sneaked off and went up to one of the battery positions. “Curiosity killed the cat” but that day I had ten lives and I needed them all.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 1.

²⁰ *The Antelope*, “Students Mobilizing for Country’s Service,” 4 May 1917. p. 4.

²¹ *The Antelope*, “Normal ‘Sammies’ in Military Service,” 4 January 1918. p.1.

²² Ibid. p.1.

²³ Dieter Storz, “Artillery”, in 1914-1918-online. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War* (Berlin: Freie Universitat Berlin, 2014). Accessed 4 December 2018. p.4.

Fritz had a hunch that our men were up to some mischief so he decided to spoil our fun. He planted the first one between two gun emplacements and got three men. That was all for him tho. We were safe in dugouts for the next two hours while he sent over 300 ninety pounders. One of them wormed itself into the dugout I was in and then forgot its mission. It was given a respectful burial the next day. Another crashed into the roof above me and a fragment from Fritz politely removed my derby. I put in for a wound stripe for the hat but never got it. Worst of all I lost the hat.²⁴

Others, like Donald Dow, Loyd Keyner, Leslie Lewis, and Wilbur Markaye, joined the service in December 1917 into an exciting, but terrifying, new section of the Army. Their regiment was transformed during and after the war into what is known today as the Chemical Corps. They served as members of the 30th Engineer's Regiment, also known as the "Gas and Flame Regiment."²⁵ This regiment was the first attempt by the U.S. Army to organize and train their own units of gas and "hell fire" troops to deploy in Europe. These former KSNS students were a part of an essential unit in the American experience in WWI. The 30th Engineer's Regiment was re-designated during the war as the 1st Gas Regiment on 13 July 1918. The regiment was deployed to France in July 1918 and saw intense action during the St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne offensives.²⁶

New to the U.S. military, and to the rest of the world prior to 1914, was the use of airplanes in combat missions. Airplanes were mostly being used for scouting missions during the first years of the war in Europe where they provided valuable intelligence on enemy troop movements, supply lines, and up-to-date battle information to the general staffs of the European Armies. However, by the time the U.S. entered the war, airplanes had been improved enough to

²⁴ *The Antelope*. "F.A. Cedarburg Writes K.S.N.S.", 10 January 1919. p.1.

²⁵ Edward G. Lengel, *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008), p. 77-78.

²⁶ Edward G. Lengel. *To Conquer Hell*, p. 77.

become effective short-range bombers and deadly dog-fighters. Corporal Charles B. Baker of the 322nd Aero Squadron and Private D. E. Sorenson of the 91st Aero Squadron, both alumni of KSNS, were two of a select few Americans that were able to serve in the Aviation Corps during the war.²⁷ Sgt. Leonard T. Waterman of the 314th Motor Supply Train, was on the receiving end of these new airplanes during the war and wrote about his experience. On 12 August 1918 he writes the following passage in a letter to *The Antelope*: “The last two nights our slumbers have been disturbed by small air raids. Bombs have dropped within a radius of one-fourth to one-half mile each night. The first night was real exciting for the air seemed to be full of buzzing machines. Anti-Aircraft and machineguns were booming in every direction.”²⁸

While some were assigned new innovative roles in the American Expeditionary Forces, others were placed into the standard infantry and cavalry units that made up the bulk of the military. One of the more interesting characteristics of World War I was the use of outdated strategies, such as cavalry charges, in the face of the awesome new firepower brought by heavy artillery and automatic machine guns. One KSNS student, J. H. Dryden of the 305th Cavalry Regiment, was still convinced of the effectiveness of the cavalry when he wrote a letter to *The Antelope* published 5 April 1918. He wrote that a “charge is a very imposing thing. If the much loved ‘Bill’ could see one of these cavalry regiments practicing up for his benefit he would throw up his hands and give up.”²⁹

Most of the infantrymen from the school were enlisted in the 134th Infantry or the 355th Infantry Regiments, 89th Division of the AEF. These regiments were not kept together as strictly

²⁷ *The Antelope*, “Normal ‘Sammies’ in Military Service,” 4 January 1918. p.1.

²⁸ *The Antelope*. “Letters From the Boys in Camp”, 27 September 1918. p.4.

²⁹ *The Antelope*. “Some Letters From the Soldier Boys”, 5 April 1918. p.4.

Nebraskan units so most of the KSNS students who served in them were away from their former classmates much more than the artillerymen of the 127th HFA were. Many of the soldiers in the 355th Infantry saw active duty battle in France from July to November 1918. Again, these men took part in the St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne battles that proved deadly to thousands of American soldiers. Carl Melin of the 355th Infantry Regiment was badly burned after being exposed to mustard gas on the frontlines during the St. Mihiel Offensive. On 16 August 1918 he writes the following in a letter to *The Antelope*:

I have been in the hospital for two weeks getting over some mustard burns. They are very slow in healing and quite painful. They shot gas at us for an hour and a half and I think that [they] were every variety know to scientists. I wish we could keep the German lines continually swamped in mustard gas because I'm convinced that it is a very effective weapon. I'm sure they get more gas than we do though so I ought to be satisfied.³⁰

The rest of the Kearney State Normal School alums who served were scattered throughout a variety of positions in the military. Philip H. Person was assigned to Evacuation Hospital No. 5 as part of a field medical unit in France.³¹ His hospital was positioned directly behind the front lines and was tasked with providing immediate care for soldiers that had fallen in battle. Sergeant Leonard T. Waterman served in France in the Headquarters Department of the 314th Supply Train doing mostly office work. Though typically this would have shielded him from the dangers of frontline combat, he wrote in a letter to *The Antelope* that his position was under constant bombing from enemy air-raids in July and August 1918.³² Other assignments for KSNS soldiers ranged from service in the Coastal Artillery Corps on both sides of the country,

³⁰ *The Antelope*. "Letters From the Boys in Camp", 27 September 1918. p.2.

³¹ Ibid. p.1.

³² Ibid. p.2.

the Signal Service Regiments that organized communications for the Navy, and even to Harvard Radio School which helped modernize the technology in US Army and Navy.³³

Although the war had significant impacts on the students and staff from the school, there were three soldiers from KSNS that paid a price higher than any other in the form of the ultimate sacrifice. The three soldiers' fatalities came by way of three different war-related causes. The first was Seaman 2nd Class Floyd H. Hedglin, who was killed on 31 May 1918. Floyd originally enlisted in the Aviation Corps, but was transferred to the Naval Radio Department on 25 April 1918.³⁴ He was on his way back to the U.S. from his first troop transport mission to Europe on the morning of 31 May 1918 when just after 8 a.m. his ship, the USS *President Lincoln*, was hit by three torpedoes launched from the German submarine *U-90*. The torpedoes hit and exploded on the port side of the *Lincoln*, which caused it to rapidly take on water and sink in only about fifteen minutes.³⁵ The *President Lincoln* was the largest troop carrier in the U.S. Navy at the time and was the largest U.S. ship sunk during WWI.³⁶ Floyd Hedglin was one of only 26 men to die during the attack. The other 689 servicemen survived a grueling 14 hours aboard life boats until they were rescued by two U.S. destroyers, the *Warrington* and *Smith*, later that night.³⁷

³³ *The Antelope*. "Some Letters From the Soldier Boys", 5 April 1918. p.4.

³⁴ *The Antelope*. "Memorial Services At the K.S.N.S For Former Students Who Gave Their Lives For Their Country", 16 May 1919. p.1.

³⁵ *The Antelope*. "The Blue Star Turns to Gold", 14 June 1918. p.1.

³⁶ "The Sinking of USS President Lincoln", Naval History and Heritage Command, US Navy, updated September 2017, accessed 30 November 2018, <https://www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/wars-and-events/world-war-i/incidents--1918/uss-president-lincoln-torpedoed-and-sunk-by-u-90.html>.

³⁷ Ibid.

The next death that hit the school's soldiers was the death of Reverend William Henry James Wilby, which came on 4 October 1918. He was the pastor of the KSNS's Congregational Church in 1917, and was enrolled in classes at the school before he entered military service at the end of the same year. He received an exemption from regular military service and was allowed to serve as an Army Chaplain.³⁸ Reverend Wilby died at sea on his way to France while attached to an engineer's regiment as their Chaplain. He fell victim to the Influenza Pandemic of 1918, and died due to complications with the illness like so many others did throughout 1918 and 1919.³⁹

The last death to hit the school's soldiers was the most impactful. This was the death of Clarence Olsen who served in the 355th Infantry Regiment, 89th Division. Clarence was wounded in France during the third and final phase of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in late October 1918.⁴⁰ Just two weeks before the Armistice was signed and called an end to the fighting. Clarence was hit by an exploding artillery shell and a German gas grenade while going over the top of his trench and advancing towards the German line. The incident happened just hours after he finished writing a letter to his brother Henry on 28 October 1918. The German artillery shell hit and exploded near him shattering both of his legs. He was then exposed to a nearby gas grenade that infected his wounds and caused partial paralysis his arms.⁴¹ The wounds he sustained caused both of his legs to be amputated in the field evacuation hospital before he was moved to Base Hospital No. 49 on 15 November.⁴² This base hospital was actually nicknamed

³⁸ *The Antelope*. "In Memory of Reverend Wilby", 16 May 1919. p.1.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p.1.

⁴⁰ *The Antelope*. "Clarence Olsen Writes From France", 13 December 1918. p.4.

⁴¹ *The Antelope*. "Olsen's Nurse Writes.", 16 May 1919. p.4.

⁴² *The Antelope*. "Surgeon Writes Family", 16 May 1919. p.4.

“Nebraska’s Hospital” because it was created and staffed by members of the University of Nebraska’s Medical College at Omaha.⁴³ Clarence carried out correspondence with his family back home while in the hospital and attempting to recover from the wounds. On 5 November 1918 he wrote the following passage describing his condition in a letter to his mother: “My Dear Mother: I had just got thru writing a letter to Henry on October 28th and telling [him] how safe we are, but Fritz got the best of me that same evening. I am now in the hospital minus one leg just above the knee and a shrapnel hole thru the other one just below the knee. I am getting along as well as can be expected and lately have not suffered very much.”⁴⁴

Clarence died from his wounds and a subsequent case of bronchial pneumonia on 2 December 1918 in Allerey, France. He is the only infantry fatality of all 401 Kearney State Normal School students and staff that served during World War I.⁴⁵ What made Olsen’s story especially moving were his letters. His brother Henry was an editor of *The Antelope* at the time and he helped publish the letters in the paper that told of the final days, and even hours, leading up to his brother’s fatal injury. These letters included the blood and mud soaked letter written by Clarence Olsen on the eve of his injuries. Clarence did not get a chance to mail the letter until he reached the hospital and had a nurse send it for him.⁴⁶ The ominous ending of the last letter he would ever write by himself, written on 28 October 1918, read as follows:

⁴³ Marilyn Irvin Holt, “Nebraska’s Base Hospital No. 49 in World War I,” *Nebraska History* vol. 98, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 200-201, <https://history.nebraska.gov/publications>.

⁴⁴ *The Antelope*. “Clarence Olsen Writes From France”, 13 December 1918. p.4.

⁴⁵ *The Antelope*. “Surgeon Writes Family”, 16 May 1919. p.4.

⁴⁶ *The Antelope*. “Clarence Olsen Writes From France”, 8 November 1918. p.2.

All around me is artillery, every kind and size, all the way from “one pounders”... to the real “ten inchers”. And farther back there are “twelves” and “fourteens” and “sixteens” and who knows what else. Some morning I guess we will be wakened up with a real Fourth-of-July celebration going back of us and then it will be “Over the top and on down hill” with the Fritzies ahead swinging the “double time” trying to get out of our way.⁴⁷

Every subsequent letter was transcribed by a nurse in the hospital due to his arms being mostly paralyzed, and most letters were simply grime updates from Base Hospital No. 49’s staff to his family.⁴⁸ Dr. Justus E. Olsson of Lexington, Nebraska wrote a letter to Clarence’s mother on 24 January 1919 that detailed what had happened to her son and described his funeral service in France. He also wrote about the tragedy of Clarence’s death and how his last days were spent. “I talked to him each day as we both came from Nebraska and have the same name. He related many interesting, at the same time, harrowing experiences at the front.” Dr. Olsson continued, “The tragic part of it all is the fact that he should fight through the war and be cut down when victory was in sight, but he was happy in being able to live and know that the war was over and won, and all due to the American Dough-boy.”⁴⁹

The fighting of World War I ended with an armistice on 11 November 1918; about one and a half years after the US entered the conflict. In that short amount of time, Kearney State Normal School saw 401 students and staff enter the military and serve their country for the purpose of making the world safe for freedom and democracy. Whether those ambitions were misguided or not is a debate for historians, but for the men that served, that cause was everything. The consequences of World War I would lead the U.S., and Kearney, back to war in 1941. Once again calling upon the young men and women of the college to serve their country. It

⁴⁷ *The Antelope*. “Clarence Olsen Writes From France”, 20 December 1918. p.2.

⁴⁸ *The Antelope*. “Olsen’s Nurse Writes.”, 16 May 1919. p.4.

⁴⁹ *The Antelope*. “Surgeon Writes Family”, 16 May 1919. p.4.

is vital that we remember the sacrifices made by those who served, and that we understand the history of the role this institution played during the first great war. Hopefully, by learning this history, students and members of the community will be better prepared to confront whatever future challenges may arise.